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Effective Questions

M. R. TALEBINEZAHD

Questions and answers (Q and A) form a high percentage of classroom activities that are supposed to get the learners involved in creation or re-creation of meaning through language (Chastain 1988:142). However, not all Q and A's are of communicative value.

To be effective, Q and A's should be designed to ask for information. That means in every Q and A activity there must be a communicative purpose and an information gap to be filled. Questions that do not serve that purpose will be of little value in language teaching since in reality questions are not asked in vacuums.

This article intends to show that questions and answers are very common activities that, if exploited appropriately, can help students learn and teachers judge the usefulness of what they are doing.

Display questions

Suppose you ask your student something you already know. The answer coming from the student will not satisfy the basic criterion of providing information. For instance, if you hold up your pen and ask learners "What is this?" the answer will not solve a problem, which is required for learning to take place.

Of even less value are those questions to which the answers are provided beforehand. Some teachers give their students the information and then try to ask them questions. For example, "This is a pen. What is this?" Such questions, at best, test something of the students' memory, not their comprehension. In addition, such questions are not in harmony with conversational maxims now agreed upon by many researchers (Widdowson 1990).

To clarify this point, here are some questions commonly occurring in textbooks, the source of many activities:

Example :

A: Who's Denise talking to?
She's talking to her boyfriend.
B: Who's talking to her boyfriend?
Denise is.

Example:

Teacher: Can you speak Japanese?
Student: Yes, I can.
Teacher: Can you type?
Student: Yes, I can.

Example:

A: These are nice pants!
B: Can I try them on?
A: This is a nice sweater!
B; Can I try it on?

Example:

What is it? It's a car.
Who is it? It's Sandra.
Whose car is it? It's Sandra's.
(Hartley and Viney 1989)

These above examples are what Gaies (1983) calls display questions or questions that make sure learners know a grammatical form. Within the more communicatively oriented classrooms, such questions can take the form of routine language formulae that speakers use to open, maintain, and close conversations. Kaspar (1984) calls this phatic talk.

Referential questions

However, real language does not consist solely of questions from one party and answers from another. Real language circles around referents or world knowledge in order to create messages and therefore is not form based but meaning based. Thus, questions in the language classrooms should be referential or meaning based, and not focus solely on form. The following examples are meaning-based questions:

1. Suppose you win $50,000. What are you going to do with it?

2. How do you usually spend your weekends?

There are also questions that are confined in terms of possible answers by providing obligatory contexts. These have disadvantages as well as advantages. The following will illustrate the point:

Teacher (*holding up a pen*): "This is my pen. Where is yours?" (*pointing to a student.*)

Here the student may either hold up his pen and answer "Here's mine!" or "This is my pen," or at least show that he understands by making an appropriate gesture. These answers will be acceptable in real situations. The teacher then has clearly created an information gap which has been filled by the learner. This is how real communication takes place.

Display vs. referential

This distinction does not solely apply to oral questions. In reading, too, questions can merely test the reader's knowledge of form or comprehension. To make reading questions referential (meaning based), one can make them story specific. Compare the following two types of questions on the same paragraph (Ladousse 1987):

> This is the last time I'll look at the clock. I will not look at it again. It's ten minutes past seven. He said he would telephone at five o'clock. "I'll call you at five, darling." I think that's where he said "darling." I'm almost sure he said it there. I know he called me "darling" twice, and the other time was when he said "goodbye, darling."

Questions:

1. Who is the "I"?
2. Who is the "he"?
3. Do "I" telephone?
4. Does "he" telephone?

The first two questions require exploiting schema or a general type of knowledge and therefore are referential questions. That is, the learner does not solely depend on his/her grammatical knowledge. The second two, however, are tests of knowledge of form or display questions. The fourth question only measures the student's recognition of *he,* not general knowledge of the world, which is necessary in real situations.

Widdowson (1978:5) questions the importance of asking any question that serves no communicative purpose. He believes one should first understand why a question is asked. The following example illustrates the point:

A: What is on the table?
B: A book.
A: Where is the bag?
B: On the floor.

In this case, the teacher and the student are both aware of the whereabouts of the book and the bag, and therefore no information is transferred through the activity. The teacher might, for example, ask

questions about the whereabouts of something he does not see but the learner does.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the following guidelines might prove helpful in forming classroom questions:

1. Always have a purpose for your questions, other than testing the student's knowledge of form.

2. Ask for information you do not share with your learners, but make sure they have it, because you do not want to be confined to clichés.

3. Try to contextualize your questions and make them as learning based as possible.

4. Do not let questions and answers become only one-way activities: questions from teachers and answers from students.

The act of teaching will help the teacher think and devise Q and A classroom activities that are appropriate and that add to meaningful communication. With a little care, teachers can develop constructive Q and A tasks that benefit all students.

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M. R. TALEBINEZAHD *teaches in the Department of English Language at the University of Isfahan, Iran.*

UAE

Learner-Centered Listening Assessment

CHRISTINE COOMBE AND JON KINNEY

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, we will briefly define what is meant by a learner-centered approach. Second, we will provide a rationale for infusing learner-centered techniques in a classroom assessment. Third, we will suggest a framework and specific activities for incorporating learner-centered classroom assessment techniques.

To date, the idea of learner-centered approaches to assessment, particularly in the area of listening comprehension, has not been fully explored. Although the notion of learner-centeredness has been applied successfully to teaching practice (Campbell and Kryszewska 1992; Deller 1989), methodology (Nunan 1988; Tudor 1997), curriculum development (Nunan 1988), and learner training (Wenden 1986; Wenden and Rubin 1987; Oxford 1990), little mention has been made of the possibility of applying learner-centered techniques in assessment. This is especially true in the area of listening assessment, where the testing process itself may not reflect learner needs (Rost 1990) but where assessment serves as a key source of motivation for many learners.

Learner control vs. quality control

The lack of response from testing specialists with regard to applying learner-centered techniques to the assessment of language skills, like listening, is not surprising given the natural tension between learner control and quality control in language testing. While advocates of learner-centered approaches propose giving learners control over various aspects of language learning, testing specialists maintain that assessment practices should be guided by the cornerstones of good testing, that is, validity, reliability, practicality, and washback (Alderson, Clapham, and Wall 1996), and not by individual learners themselves.

ELT practitioners can accommodate both increased learner involvement in skill area testing and still maintain high testing standards. Classroom assessment offers an ideal environment for piloting and implementing learner-centered assessment techniques. Unlike national or standardized exam situations, in classroom testing situations teachers often have control over exam development and administration. The classroom assessment environment provides opportunities to hand over decision-making duties and creative tasks to learners.

A learner-centered approach

A learner-centered approach in language instruction is founded on the concept that the learner is central in the learning process. Learners learn primarily because of what they bring to their classroom experience in terms of their perceived needs, motivations, past experiences, background knowledge, interests, and creative skills. Learners are active as opposed to passive recipients of knowledge. They may assume a decision-making role in the classroom, often deciding what is to be learned, through which activities, and at what pace. Learners can also produce materials and provide realia for the classroom. Teachers, on the other hand, are seen as facilitators, helpers, and resources (Campbell and Kryszewska 1992), with a decentralized role.

Rationale for learner-centered assessment

Advocates of learner-centered teaching methodologies and curricula argue that involving learners enhances motivation, which in turn heightens achievement. Learner-centered approaches offer additional benefits for the classroom teacher including constant needs analysis, reduced prep time through the use of student-generated materials, peer-teaching and correcting, increased group solidarity, a decentralized teacher role, increased understanding of student concerns and problems, learner-training benefits, and finally, increased maturity and responsibility among students.

Classroom teachers can expect similar benefits from adopting assessment prac-